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ABSTRACT

To get full value from citizen advisory committees, school boards may use the following suggestions and guidelines. Be sure a lay citizen committee is needed before appointing one; provide specific responsibilities and duties; appoint the members to achieve balance according to sex, race, philosophy, and geography; use rotating terms; appoint the committee officers; do not appoint school baord members to advisory committees; use simultaneous committees on the same subject; send committee report to the superintendent first; and, develop a common feeling about advisory committee values between the superintendent and school board. (Author/DW)

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HOW TO GET FULL VALUE FROM CITIZEN COMMITTEES

FOR CLINIC D-54 NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BOARD MEETING, MIAMI, FLORIDA

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As evidenced by "ballooning" board room audiences, there is an increasing public interest in what school boards are doing with their tax dollars and to their children. "Hollering" can be transformed from board room confrontations to positive utilization of community expertise in public school operations by implementing, and following through with the recommendations from, lay citizen advisory committees.

The scholarly Max Learner was at the LBJ Library in Austin for an education symposium some time ago, and told the audience that he was frequently asked if he thought there was intelligent life in outer space, and would we ever be able to communicate with that intelligent life. To which he answered, "Well, that's an interesting question, but before I answer, let me ask you a question. 'Is there intelligent life here on earth, and will we ever be able to communicate with each other?'"

Citizen participation in the public school program is a vital part of that communication system in the Austin Independent School District. A recent tabulation showed 439 lay citizens serving on over 40 advisory committees. Citizen committees provide the district with an additional "brain trust" and additional hands, with no consultant fees attached. These committees cover many areas, including textbook selection, utilization of innercity schools with declining enrollments, planning a school for the performing arts, discipline, federal program evaluation, special education, education of gifted children, career development, and human relations. We have learned a great deal from this proliferation of citizen committees and I will share with you this morning some suggestions, comments and concerns on the topic of getting full value from these citizen committees.

Initially, make sure you need a lay citizen committee before appointing one. Some school boards appoint committees simply to get the "pressure" off themselves. There is nothing wrong in doing this on occasion, but if citizens believe that every time a "tough" issue comes along the Board will appoint a committee to "take the heat" for an unpopular decision, the Board has in fact diminished its effectiveness in the decision-making process. There should exist a necessity for citizen expertise in the area of concern.

After you have decided to appoint a committee, the committee should be told specifically by the board what it is to do, what it is not to do, and when its task is to be completed.

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When we were not specific with a committee we appointed on discipline, the first action taken by the committee was to come back to the board for guidance. Without a specific task, committees will bog down in generalities. We then specifically asked the committee to research with teachers and staff alternatives to corporal punishment that would in fact change behavior.

In the actual appointing of citizen committees I offer the following words of caution. Never appoint a citizens committee in a hurry. Identify the specific tasks and expectations for the committee. Provide a general time framework in which the board would like a report, but leave it fairly flexible for more or less time as the committee sees fit. Let the committee determine its own working procedure, such as when, where and how to proceed. Answer the question as to whether the District will provide clerical and secretarial assistance. And remember consistency, to do it for one committee I believe you are obligated to do it for all other citizens committees. Appoint a committee that is balanced racially, by sex, geographically, and philosophically. This implies that board members have to figure out a way, operating as we do under open meeting laws, to talk to each other about these committee appointments before the actual appointments are made.

In the case of citizen committees of ongoing concerns, such as school discipline or special education, membership should change regularly to involve more a cross-section of the community. And yet there needs to be some continuity. Two year terms, with about half of the committee changing each year works very well. In no case would I recommend more than three years for an individual serving on a particular committee. I further believe that ongoing committees should report to the board periodically, perhaps a minimum of twice a year.

I believe that it is also beneficial for the board to appoint the chairperson and vice-chairperson of the designated citizen committee. If this is left up to the committee members, the chairperson is usually appointed at a time when the other members of this diverse group do not have a real knowledge of one another, and they simply appoint whoever shows up and appears eager at the first meeting. In the long run this may not be your most effective chairperson for the group.

I personally believe that board members do not belong on lay citizen advisory committees. In the first place, community people often assume that a board member appointed to that particular committee is an expert in that particular field. This may or may not be true. Furthermore, a board member gets a lot of "ownership" in that particular cause and becomes an advocate automatically for the position of the committee. Finally, I believe that it is in fact inhibiting to having real effective community participation for a board member to be serving on the committee. If the board is honestly seeking different perspectives and community input, it should be in the position of getting a staff report, the lay citizen advisory committee report, the

superintendent's recommendations, and then making an unbiased final decision. I submit that this is more difficult if board members are directly involved at the committee stage.

Another factor in deciding whether or not to appoint a committee at a particular time should be the number of committees in operation at that time. There should be no more committees in progess than your staff can effectively handle at once. The board should find out from the staff a "guesstimate" of what it will take in the way of secretarial staff, time commitment and staff expertise in working with these board appointed committees. And the administration must determine if it is realistic to add this on to the workload at that particular time. If clerical assistance and secretarial help is to be provided for these committees, then an amount of money should be set aside from the budget for doing so.

Very frequently, in order to get full value from citizen committees, two committees on a particular subject should be operational at virtually the same time. A staff committee appointed by the superintendent and a citizens committee appointed by the board can be working very effectively on subjects simultaneously. However, it is my suggestion that staff members should serve only as consultants to the citizens committee. Provisions should be made for communications between the citizen committee and the staff committee. The board should make sure that the superintendent provides for this close communication between citizen committees and whatever staff is involved in that particular project. The staff committee and the citizens committee so not operate together all of the time, but neither should they operate in a vacuum. Citizen committees are a most effective way of blending community input with staff decisions. citizen committees provide an opportunity for individual creative thinking, as well as cooperative shared thinking with the staff.

The final report of the citizen committee should first go to the superintendent before coming to the board in order that the board may have his assesment prior to decision-making time. The superintendent can study and provide overall assesment of the administrative operations as concerne the committee recommendations. Then the superintendent will be in a position to recommend to the board what the impact of the committee report will be to the district. It is important at this point for the superintendent to work out a procedure with the board and with the committee on how his recommendations on this topic will be shared with both. In other words, there should be a clear understanding as to whether the citizens advisory committee or the board will get his final recommendations on the matter first. I generally believe it is best to share these recommendations with the citizens adv sory committee first because the superintendent may change some of his recommendations after this sharing process and befcre the staff committee report, the citizens committee report and the superintendent's final recommendations come before the board.

Of the more than 40 citizen advisory committees that are in operation in our district at the current time, one very good example of how a committee has operated successfully is our lay citizen textbook advisory committee which has just completed its work for this year. There was a very clear delineation of duties spelled out for this committee. The lay citizen advisory committee was not to be directly involved in the professional selection progess. However, the committee did view the books that the professional textbook committee recommended for selection by the district before the professional textbook committees recommendation went to the superintendent for review, and before their recommendation went to the board. The lay citizen advisory committee reviewed the professional selections from the standpoint of biases whether sexual, racial, or ethnic, and for objectional content, objectional language, and philosophy. Any disagreement with the professional textbook committee was put in writing so that it could be forwarded to the superintendent and to the Board. Through a great deal of interchange with the lay citizens and the professional staff, many potential problems and misunderstandings in the selection of textbooks were avoided. Our citizen textbook committee also made some very fine recommendations for the future as concerns the process of textbook selection and community participation in this process.

On occasion, citizen committee input can ease potentially troublesome situations, such as determining boundary lines for school attendance areas. In our district in the past we have frequently had everyone appear in the boardroom in a confrontation type manner after a staff recommendation has been made concerning attendance zones. Within the past few weeks we followed the procedure of having representatives from the various school areas involved in possible boundary changes meet with the staff and share school data from the beginning on possible boundary changes. The net result was that a consensus was reached by most parent groups involved, having studied the necessity for change and alternative solutions thereto, before the administrations' recommendations were presented in final form to the board. As you can well imagine, there was still some disagreement on the boundary changes. But, there was far less of a boardroom confrontation and much more understanding of the necessity of the staff recommendation. And the staff modified their recommendations somewhat, such as delaying the changes for a year after receiving community input.

It is very important that there be a follow-up to citizen committee reports. Primarily, this should be the responsibility of the staff. However, in some instances it will take both board action and staff follow-up to implement the committee's recommendations. It cannot be stressed enough that the board and the superintendent should share a common feeling about the importance of citizen committees and agree on the procedure that will be followed in implementing and following up citizen committee recommendations.

One example in our district of staff follow-up on committee recommendations is in the area of discipline. Our citizens committee on discipline pointed out in their final report that new teachers were having more trouble with classooom management than any others. The staff followed up this recommendation by issuing an invitation to all the deans of colleges in the Austin area and in the near surrounding areas to meet with them and to discuss ways to jointly attack this problem. Our staff is actually helping these colleges and their respective education departments in developing programs for mastering positive classroom management techniques.

Perhaps you may have read the series of Peanuts comic strips last year concerning little league baseball and a reversal of a winning game of Charles Brown's team to that of a loss -- because of parental input to the commissioner. The bottom line was when Linus turned to Charlie Brown and said, "Don't you know Charlie Brown, in all this world there's nothing more frightening than the getting together of a group of parents!" But I submit to you that when you get a group of parents together for the purpose of utilizing their expertise in the many facets of public education rather than an intimidating group, you will be developing your most beneficial assets to your public school system and your strongest supporters when it's time for bond issues to be voted upon in your community. The more the public becomes involved in a positive manner in what's going on in the classroom, the healthier your district will be.